

A close-up, low-angle shot of a dark-colored horse's head and neck in motion. The horse is wearing a dark bridle with a bit. The background is a sandy arena floor, slightly out of focus. The lighting is bright, highlighting the texture of the horse's coat and the sand.

Rolex FEI World Cup™

# Thirty years of equestrian excellence

by Alban Poudret





This International Equestrian Federation (FEI) logo was created specifically to celebrate the partnership between Rolex and the FEI World Cup™. Swiss journalist **Max Ammann** founded the FEI World Cup™ in 1978 after he observed that competitive jumping was not receiving the international attention he believed it deserved.



The 2008 Rolex FEI World Cup™ Final included the most challenging course to date, bringing out the best in every horse and rider.

In April 2008, the FEI World Cup™ indoor equestrian series celebrated its 30th anniversary with the Rolex FEI World Cup™ Final held in Gothenburg, Sweden. Created in 1978 by Swiss journalist Max E. Ammann, it began its fourth decade in fine style with the 2009 Rolex FEI World Cup™ Finals in Las Vegas. Proof not only of the timelessness of the event, but also of its victors. The first winner of the series, Austrian Hugo Simon, is still in the saddle at the age of 66.

The earliest FEI World Cup™ competitions were the first international events to pit European riders against their North American counterparts. These “old world” versus “new world” challenges were thrilling duels of ingenuity, made even more so with the addition of South American equestrians, includ-

ing three-time victor, Brazilian champion Rodrigo Pessoa.

In a sport noteworthy for the fact that men and women compete equally for each title up to and including at Olympic level, it was the first woman rider to be ranked world number one in jumping, Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum, who emerged victorious at the 2008 final. Her stellar performance with *Shutterfly* delighted the 12,000 spectators who witnessed the reigning European champion in Gothenburg as she claimed her second FEI World Cup™ victory.

“It was my first win since Rolex began sponsoring the event,” said Michaels-Beerbaum. “That means a lot to me.” To watch the slight American, whose talent is innate and whose nerves are made of steel, ride *Shutterfly*, a strapping 15-year-old steed sired by *Silvio I*, is to see poetry in motion. Together they succeeded in

achieving the only double, faultless performance of the day at the final that was, according to those who rode it, the most difficult in the history of the Rolex FEI World Cup™. Michaels-Beerbaum, who is a native of California but now lives in Germany, was followed by Richard Fellers of the United States in second place and Germany’s Heinrich Hermann Engemann in third.

Michaels-Beerbaum received her trophy from the President of the FEI, HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein of Jordan. “It’s fabulous,” said a delighted Michaels-Beerbaum. “*Shutterfly* was exceptional. He didn’t make a single error starting on Thursday all the way through Sunday. There was tremendous pressure and the course was well conceived but terribly difficult. You look instantly ridiculous when you make mistakes so I



If the FEI World Cup™, now in its fourth decade, has proven its timelessness, so too have its victors. The first winner of the series, Austrian Hugo Simon, is still in the saddle at the age of 66.



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have to savour these perfect performances.”

The Gothenburg win followed Michaels-Beerbaum’s victory in Las Vegas in 2005. Jumping for Germany, Michaels-Beerbaum is only the seventh rider to win multiple FEI World Cup™ titles and her victory puts her in the same league as Pessoa, who has won three times in a row. (The list of other multiple champions includes Hugo Simon, Conrad Homfeld, Ian Millar, John Whitaker and Marcus Ehning.)

In Las Vegas in 2007 Michaels-Beerbaum fell while tied for the lead. “I thought about that several times,” she said at Gothenburg. “It was in my mind particularly on Friday when I was faced with a similar situation. Then on Sunday

between two rounds I said to myself, ‘You’re still standing so take advantage of it!’”

This triumph comes after a string of successes, including two Rolex IJRC (International Jumping Riders Club) Top 10 Final in Geneva and the European gold medal in 2007 at Mannheim, Germany. The latter confirmed the determined rider as world number one in jumping, thus becoming the first woman ever to occupy that coveted spot. She also took fourth place in the jumping event at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Pressure and nerves played an important role in the 2008 Rolex FEI World Cup™ Final. Swiss competitor Beat Mändli was fighting for victory on Sunday

**Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum's perfect performance led to triumph at the 2008 Rolex FEI World Cup™ Final in Gothenburg. She was awarded her trophy by HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, 13th President of the FEI.**



and was no doubt regretting the two early faults, exacerbated by a faultless second round. He finished fourth in Gothenburg, after taking first place in Las Vegas in 2007. Mändli might take consolation in the fact that sharing the fourth place position with Irish rider Jessica Kürten and Germany's Ludger Beerbaum (Michaels-Beerbaum's brother-in-law) is more of an honour than a defeat.

There is an almost constant self-questioning among the leading riders, even if watching Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum and *Shutterfly* flying over the bars makes competitive jumping look effortless.

The course, designed by Rolf Lüdi of Switzerland, caused a number of contestants to comment about

the difficulty of the course. "I have always admired Rolf Lüdi. But after riding this course I'm not sure how much I like him!" joked Kürten after the race. "You had to have an exceptional horse to ride a perfect course."

The final round on the Sunday, which often confirms the leaders' positions and is frequently a test of nerves, created multiple technical problems at Gothenburg and riders had to focus on their strategy more than ever. Lüdi intentionally designed a course that challenged the horse and rider's mental ability almost more than their physical stamina.

The presence of Rolex as Title Sponsor of the Western European League of the FEI World

Cup™ motivated many of the organisers to do their best, with spectacular results all around. The best riders participated in most of the 12 qualifying competitions during the 2007–2008 season. One of the highlights of the pre-World Cup competitions was the neck-and-neck duel between Germany's Marcus Ehning and Michaels-Beerbaum in 's-Hertogenbosch (Netherlands), just before Gothenburg. The close competition between the world's best riders from five continents only heightened the anticipation and the excitement of the 2008 Rolex FEI World Cup™ Final.

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